Language That Drives Action

An Introduction to NLP

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What is NLP?

NLP stands for neurolinguistic programming. There are lots of ways to define this, but the best way to understand it is that NLP is a response to this question: how can people set themselves up to naturally (N) use language (L) to create results (programs). It shows you how to use perception (neurology) and language to generate behaviours that will get create predictable, positive results. It's not concerned with theories: it's concerned with observing and replicating the ways people achieve satisfying results.

It often seems more complicated than this. NLP began in the efforts of graduate students and professors to understand what they called "the structure of subjective experience." They wanted to do the interesting part of academic work without the painfully slow and detailed work required in academics, but they often used sciencey language to describe what they were doing. Academics objected to the use of sciencey language and so wrote off the entire field.

Under the sciencey stuff is a model that has much in common with the scientific method. The founders of NLP observed therapists as they helped clients to live in more satisfying ways. They made guesses about which perceptions, language and behaviours were necessary to make change happen. They tested these perceptions and behaviours to see if they could get the results they had observed. When they got those results, they stabilized the necessary perceptions, language and behaviours in patterns and began a new cycle of testing (by teaching the patterns to others and seeing if they could get the results).

The problem is that they didn't use the structures of science to check their own perceptions and assumptions. As we will see, human thinking is tricky: often we get the results we expect to get. Scientists check their assumptions about their experimental design through various layers of the process, from grant applications to the peer-reviewed publication of results. The price for this is that science moves slowly and it can only study small chunks of human behaviour at a time. Good science is hard to apply to big human questions.

This is as true now as it was in the 1970s. You can read lots of stuff that starts as science, but ends up being sciencey as the results of research are amplified and transformed so that they can be applied in a practical way. Scientists have shown that even scientists are subject to the same cognitive limitations as other people: their observations are shaped by their beliefs and expectations, and they are prone to leaping from what has been proven to what might be true. This is especially likely when the science in question could change the ways people think or behave.

The founders of NLP (who include but are not limited to John Grinder and Richard Bandler) might have had less trouble with critics if they had explained their methods differently. They could have explained that they were interested in uncovering how language can lead to behaviour. It's an interesting question: how does a perception make the jump into abstraction (by being put into words) and how do words make the jump back into the body (where behaviour happens)? This is not the kind of question that science is especially well-suited to answering. Concepts don't exist in the way that microbes or metals exist. They can't be studied in the same way.

Language seems to exist in the way that a chessboard exists: as a stylized representation that works according to strict rules that are separate from real, lived experience. We talk about how language works or about the rules of grammar as though these things are separate from the way people work. You might have heard people in NLP say, "The map is not the territory." This should amaze no one. It's the same as saying: the book is just words on a paper. The story is our experience as those words generate sights and sounds and feelings in our imaginations.

When we study language instead of people, we can explore knowledge and possibility in a way that is neither sciencey nor science. Language is an art, and the arts ask different questions. Scientists ask: "is this true?" Artists ask: "does this work?" What they mean by work is most often a form of "does this alter perceptions in an interesting or useful way?"

So let's put language back into NLP so that it explores a natural language of performance. This is a language that is generated naturally (using the human brain/body/mind) and results in behaviour (a performance). Instead of getting caught up in the endless complications of academic science, we can use the mindset of artists to ask: "what can we notice and what can we say so what we create will work?" In other words, "how can our words make change happen?"

Words That Change Behaviours

Let's begin with a definition for behaviour. It seems simple enough: behaving is what we do: it's a synonym for action. But some of our behaviours are internal: we make a series of changes in our perception and physiology that result in a new emotion or mental state. Sometimes this is done to change the quality of our internal, subjective experience and sometimes it is done to change the quality of our communication with someone else.

Language is a behaviour we use, sometimes to change the quality of our own experience, and sometimes to communicate with other people. Language takes an internal sensation and expresses it as if it were outside us (the feeling becomes the word). Language takes an external phenomena (like sunshine) and expresses it as if it were inside us (because we have to process the word in our own thinking to make sense of it). So language is a behaviour that governs the relationship between what is outside us and what is inside us. Language also generates or motivates behaviours that are not language.

It takes four stages to convert words into behaviour. This is how you get yourself, or someone else, to do something. Here are the four steps:

1. **Connect.** This is the first function of language. Language connects you to things in the world governed by the laws of physics (the 'real' world of stuff and action). Language connects you to the parts of your mind that are outside your conscious awareness at any given moment. You can think of this as your unconscious mind, although this part of you is actually more wide awake and more responsive than your conscious mind is. Language also opens up a channel of communication between you and other human beings. Both functions depend on you having a desire to connect. If you use words without intention, you won't be able to move to step 2.

2. **Choose a state.** Your state is the combination of your physiology, your mental awareness, and your emotions at a given moment. When you choose words, you open up a connection that will either reinforce your state or influence it to change. You might be wide awake but your words might connect you to watching the flames in a fireplace while you struggle to keep your eyes from closing. Did you notice what happened? You have to choose to follow the words or choose to stay wide awake. All situations make it easier to move to some states and harder to hold other states. This is even more true when you are connecting with one or more other people. As you connect, your state begins to shift to match what you are observing. If you want to maintain your state, you will need both intention and willpower.

3. **Communicate ideas.** If you are communicating with yourself, words will come into your awareness and either support your state or shift it. You'll need a way to hear the ideas within the words so that you can decide what they mean and whether to hold onto them or let them go. The same process is happening when you send words to other people. The words catch attention with a call to build or change state. Listeners have to separate out the change in state from the ideas behind the words to decide what to keep and what to let pass.

4. **Motivate action.** Behaviours are almost entirely generated by processes outside conscious awareness because they involve too many working parts to be controlled entirely by your conscious mind. Imagine trying to walk to your front door by consciously producing the movements required to stand and walk. You'll see that even simple behaviours cannot be defined in language: they can only be seeded or suggested. To make behaviours happen, you need language that drops through critical thinking and lands in the body/brain system that controls action.

Since NLP is more art than science, it offers techniques to manipulate attention (which is the function of the arts) at each of these four stages. These techniques are rooted in the observation of what has worked for others when they have successfully navigated one of these stages of using language to make change happen. The techniques are compatible with what scientists know about human perception, but they are not science themselves. Science is only one way to observe how people achieve results.

In this introduction to NLP as the natural language of performance, we'll summarize some of the core techniques NLP practitioners use to influence perception so that they can change behaviour in themselves and others.

Get Yourself To Do Stuff

The most-asked question in the courses I train is "how can I do this for myself?" As much as people want to be able to get other people to do stuff, they are even more concerned with how to manage their own experience so that they are able to enter useful states and take the action necessary to move in the direction they have chosen. They want to use neurolinguistic programming (NLP) so that they can make better choices about what they want, what they notice, and what they do.

Begin with understanding that NLP shows us how to set ourselves up (so that behaviour feels natural) to use language (which governs our perception and meaning) to take action that creates change in us or in the world (performance). This allows us to look at the techniques of NLP and understand how they fit into our four-stage model of using language to drive behaviour. When you are interested in using NLP for directing and motivating your own behaviour, you are using language as the interface or connection between your conscious mind and the many processes that shape attention, perception and action. NLP has referred to these processes as "the unconscious" or "the unconscious mind."

Let's take a moment and understand why that term is so sticky, although it's not scientific and it's not even a good description. The part of you that drives your experience is often called your mind. You probably think of your mind as the voice in your head that tells you what you are thinking and you might think of your mind as reasonable (it uses logic) and knowledgeable (it contains information) and purposeful (it holds values and objectives that you can know). The part of you that is not expressed through the voice in your head includes all of your body, most of your memories, and possibly some spiritual stuff. That's unnerving. It sounds like most of you is not available for you to know and therefore is outside your control. But, when we create a label for all those powerful processes that seems to be balanced with what we do know about ourselves (our consciousness), we feel better about walking around with unknowable super powers (which is what the computing power of your brain feels like to your limited mind). We take the sting out by defining all of this as not-conscious instead of describing what it can do. And by calling it a mind, we assume it is purposeful, knowledgeable and reasonable even if we can't see how it is working.

There are benefits to calling the biggest part of what drives us our 'unconscious mind' and so the term sticks. It sets up a dynamic where we expect our two minds to meet and connect and communicate, and many NLP techniques are ways to make this happen. Let's look at the four stages of moving from connection to action and see how NLP applies a limited set of insights and practices you can use to manage your own experience.

1. Connect With Your Unconscious Mind

Every thought occurs in both minds, conscious and unconscious (the voice in your head and the brain processes that produce it). Internal connection means that you want to check your conscious thinking with the super powers contained in your unconscious processes. NLP shares a core assumption with mindfulness practice: when you take time out to become aware of your body and senses, you also gain heightened access to the insights produced by the unconscious mind. The way to connect is to slow down and label what you are noticing without judgment.

In NLP, this is called mapping. It means assuming that the unconscious mind shows up in the patterns of perception and sensation in your senses and body. To map a state or experience, you simply pay attention to how it is represented by your body and senses. You start at the top of your head and move your attention through your body, noticing any sensations in your head, arms, chest, core, legs or feet. Then you notice how the same state is represented in the qualities of your visual experience and hearing (called sub-modalities in NLP). For visuals, this means noticing if you are seeing a picture and whether it is still or moving, in colour, in focus, etc. For sounds, it means noticing rhythm, tone, and melody in both external and internal sound. The result of this non-judgmental attention is congruence, the feeling that all parts of you (both conscious and unconscious minds) are present and aligned. You know that this is always true in theory; this allows you to experience that truth as a state (your physiology, sensation and ideation all combined).

NLP has often been criticized for practices that rely on identifying sensory preferences (something that can be a product of the mapping process). There is little doubt that the idea that people prefer one sense over the others is mostly nonsense. However, it might be useful nonsense. Looking for sensory preferences means paying attention to the part of yourself that is expressed outside of language (the part that notices sound or visuals or sensations rather than ideas or words). It seems likely that some people in NLP train themselves to notice sensory preferences as a kind of signalling system that alerts them to give conscious attention to some process that is going on outside of conscious awareness. That isn't mysticism: it simply means that your brain works more quickly in more dimensions than your much slower conscious mind. Sometimes you can afford to wait for your mind to catch up and sometimes (like when a ceiling is about to come crashing down) you need to notice an intuition before you can explain it. As NLP trains people to pay attention to sensation and perception, it provides a model of how to connect with the bigger self. Scientists do the same kind of thing when they take a break from a wicked problem to make room for an insight that will show them what to do next.

2. Choose A Useful State

Usefulness depends on having chosen a goal or direction. If you don't know where you are going, it's hard to know what to pack for the trip. We'll assume that if you don't already have something you want to accomplish, your goal is to identify a goal. NLP assumes (presupposes) that if you were in the right state to do what you wanted to do, you would simply engage in doing it. If you're not sure what to do, you are probably not in the appropriate state. Many NLP patterns and processes exist to help you change your state so that your behaviour (including language) flows naturally from your connection to your whole self.

Change your body

Since your state is a combination of mind and body, you can alter your state either by changing your body (physiology and sensation) or by changing your mind. However, the most common way to know that you have changed your mind is that you have connected ideas to things in the world governed by physics (the world you can experience through your senses). For instance, you probably don't experience optimism in a vacuum; you experience it by imagining good things happening or appearing. If you imagine good things happening or appearing, you will find yourself becoming optimistic. This means that changing your physiology (you body or your perceptions) can change your mind.

You can alter your physiology by changing your expression, posture or breathing, or by moving. There are many NLP processes (called patterns or edits) that allow you to systematically focus on your goal while using a expression, posture or breathing pattern that you associate with the state you want to hold. Other patterns encourage you to move into a state by literally moving: you walk or dance or exercise in a way that interrupts the state you are holding (because it is not optimal) and mimics the physiology of the state you would rather hold. This comes from both science and the arts. Science has shown, for instance, that exercise reduces depression. Dance and drama have always used movement to represent states. So conditioning people to notice and use the association between physiology and state is not unusual and not sciencey. It is effective.

Use anchors to change states

There are two practices in NLP used for changing state that are more sciencey (or artsy, depending on your point of view). The first is called anchoring. Anchors are not sciencey: there is lots of evidence that our brains work in patterns called neural or cognitive webs which contain all the information from a given moment in time ("what fires together wires together."). This means that sometimes one sensation will bring a memory into awareness. You have probably heard a song on the radio that immediately took you back to a very specific time and experience. Or perhaps there is a food from your childhood that triggers a wave of experience when you smell it. These associations form naturally (without intention) as part of the way the mind/brain/body system works.

In NLP, particular sensations (a sight, sound, smell or feeling) are deliberately introduced during a memory or experience so that these sensations can be used as anchors to stabilize the memory of that state and make it easier to retrieve when it will be useful. There are two ways to use anchors. The most obvious is to use an anchor to get back into a state you have previously experienced. The second is to get back into a state you have previously experienced so that you can change it. You change it by using the anchor to hold the state while you introduce new elements that were not present in the original experience. If the anchor brings back an unhappy or unhelpful state, you can add new strengths or perspective to that memory. If the anchor brings back a useful state, you can add more strengths to it.

Let's use an example. Imagine you notice that you are feeling particularly energized; you deliberately focus on the socks you are wearing while you are noticing your energy. The next time you want to feel that energy, you put on those socks. This is the simple elicitation of a state using an anchor (remembering).

Now let's say that you were energized while wearing those socks because you were running away from a burning building. Those socks now have energy, but they also have terror and, probably, the smell of smoke. When you wear the socks again, you feel the energy and the terror and you imagine the smell of smoke. That's probably not what you want. You could just get rid of the socks, but if they are good socks, you might want to change the state instead. You could use a second anchor (a seashell you found on the beach on a particularly lovely vacation) to add calm and fresh air to the energy in the socks. You would do this by wearing the socks and holding the seashell at the same time, moving your attention up from the socks to the feeling of the seashell in your hands. You have now collapsed the anchors (in NLP jargon), which means that you have used two anchors to create a single, useful state.

Now imagine that you have a tricky meeting coming up, a meeting that will test your endurance and your flexibility. You can put on your energizing socks and hold your seashell until you feel both calm and energized at the same time. As you do, you can remember a time when you were able to change your communication or thinking to influence someone else. This third state of thinking flexibly combines with the calm and the energy to create a kind of super-state appropriate for your meeting. As you experience it, you tap the back of your cell phone case lightly with your index finger. When you go into the meeting, you simply tap exactly the same

way to remember the times when you were flexible and calm and energized. Whenever you notice that you have moved away from this useful state, you just tap the case again.

Does it work? It is not the kind of thing that you can test experimentally. That's why it is sciencey rather than science. It might not work, or it might work but for different reasons. We do know (through science) that mental rehearsal is a powerful way to prepare for real performance. And we do know (also through science) that the brain can run multiple processes simultaneously at very high speeds. So it is theoretically possible (but probably unprovable) that anchors work as a kind of mental rehearsal that increases the odds that you will perform the way you rehearsed.

We also know (more science) that human beings are very good at acting as if their beliefs are true. This is sometimes called the placebo effect and sometimes called confirmation bias. It means that even if there is no scientific evidence that anchors help you change or maintain useful states, you might still be able to use anchors to change or maintain useful states simply by going through the process of setting them. You wouldn't even have to believe they worked: you would simply act as if you believed it and your mind/brain/body might use that as a signal to make arrangements for you to get the benefit you were trying to achieve.

Change Your Mind

Using your imagination might sound a lot like using your mind to change your mind. What you would miss would be that imagination depends on your ability to use your senses. If you can't see, hear, feel, smell or taste, then you have nothing to attach to your concepts and beliefs to make them feel real. So when NLP uses your imagination to change your state, it's using your internal representations (your memory) of your physical experience to change your current state (including your present physiology).

There are different ways of using imagination to change your state but what they all have in common is that you isolate the state you want to change and then you change the way you represent that state until it is transformed into a more desirable state. This is another way of saying that you create a map of the state you are in and then alter elements of the map so that it represents a different state. This is not science. This is art.

The purpose of art is to change the way we perceive our experience. NLP uses the principles of art to allow people to shape their experience in the way that a potter might shape and colour clay. The raw material stays the same but the way it looks and functions can change dramatically.

It's easier to follow an example than an explanation (because human thought begins in sensory experience, not in concepts). Imagine a state that is getting in the way of a behaviour that would be helpful to you. Don't imagine trauma: this is only an introductory e-book. Imagine a time you are moderately nervous or a situation where being annoyed makes it hard to be as effective as you would like to be. There are many times we are able to function at 75% of our best performance (but wouldn't it be better to simply perform as well as possible?).

Now remember a time you experienced this state. Your experience happens in your body at a particular time and a particular place. Allow your memory to begin to fill in the details of where you were and when you were and what you were seeing and hearing and feeling. If you picked something that makes you moderately nervous (having a difficult conversation with a colleague, for instance), you might notice changes in your physiology and in your focus and perhaps in the sound of voices as you remember another time you had this kind of conversation.

Now imagine that you are a film editor and you can edit the movie you are playing about this memory. You can change the lighting and the camera angles and the sound. Because you are imagining, you can also change the focus within your physiology, so you notice the strength in the big muscles in your legs instead of the twitchiness of your fingers as you fidget. The more you are able to fine tune your representation, the more choice you will have about the state in which you want to do this behaviour that will be helpful in achieving something you want to achieve.

Some NLP experts will call this a personal edit: they'll use the metaphor of an editor to explain how you can change the qualities of an experience without changing the experience itself. Other people will simply refer to the patterns of NLP. The process is always the same, although the details of how you imagine differently may change. In all these edits or patterns, you practice controlling your imagination so that you imagine noticing different things about yourself and your situation in order to support a new and more useful state. (This is what is meant by the

structure of subjective experience: you choose the sensory information out of which you will construct meaning about your situation or your behaviour).

Edits work the way art works. You perceive differently so you open up new states and they lead to new behaviours. Arguing about the science of how they work is interesting to scientists but doesn't make you better at managing your state so that you can behave in ways that get results you like. Your efforts are better spent on developing the willpower it will take to change your natural (unconsciously produced) state so that you can do more or do better. It's relatively simple to use NLP on yourself, but it is not easy.

If you wanted to look for science that supports using imagination to change your state, you could look at cognitive behavioural science or you could explore studies of mental rehearsal.

3. Change Meaning To Change Results

It takes a different kind of imagination to change the meaning of what you observe so that you can observe new information that points to new ideas. Because the human mind defaults to a confirmation bias (it looks for evidence that beliefs are true), it takes both intention and willpower to learn new ideas so that you can do new things.

Learning requires a basic structure, or frame, that gives meaning to information which has been acquired through the senses or generated through the interaction of facts (detectable by the senses) and reason (thoughts without sensory data). Imagination is the ability to remember sensory data and rearrange it to create sensory representations of things that don't exist or haven't existed in your own experience. Without a frame, there is no meaning attached to either facts or imagination, and there is no way of evaluating the products of reason.

As long as you support a frame or work within it, everything can be clear. Nothing is confusing, because nothing is changing. New information is slotted into existing spots for it, often without becoming sticky or memorable. If you know the slots, you can always look up what they contain. This condition feels good because the brain can run it without using many resources. It is efficient to continue to add information to an existing frame and the brain/mind/body feels good when it is using resources efficiently.

When you want to add new information in a way that supports new meaning, you feel confused. Confusion is a sign that you are changing the frame (the structure of meaning) instead of the details. This is necessary if you want to learn the ideas that will drive new behaviours (and new results). Imagine changing a frame as moving house: everything is placed in new arrangements in new boxes and then sorted again into different rooms. While there may be order at the beginning and order at the end, in the middle there is something that feels uncomfortably chaotic.

Put another way, when you find yourself feeling confusion, you know that your intention is leading to a new way of relating to the information you have stored in your unconscious mind.

Changing Frames

Framing is both science and sciencey. The truth is that science is still learning to study relationships with the tools it has used to study phenomena. Framing is art: it's the construction of meaning from perception. You can learn to frame learning in the same way that you can learn to frame a building or an argument.

Learning means acquiring a new structure which supports new ideas and information. When you use a new frame to contain old information, the information is placed in a different context and in new relationships. You make new connections between what you have observed (sensations) and what you can do.

The easiest frames to see and understand are clichés. Think of a project you are working on (or one that you have been planning to complete but are not yet actually working on). Is it a journey or a battle? Now notice that you had an answer to that question, and that answer sets up how you will see various aspects of the project (to travel, you need a way to move and a way to know you are moving in the right direction; to fight, you need weapons). Are the people around you travelling companions or are they allies (or adversaries)? The frame (travel or battle) sets up the meaning you assign to the information you have as you consider the project.

The meaning of information determines your response to it. You don't destroy a road because it is bumpy or leads to a dead end. But you might reasonably destroy an opponent's weapon. You can be curious about the situations you encounter while travelling, but relaxed curiosity can be dangerous in the middle of a war. These differences are obvious in the metaphorical frame but are less obvious in the actual project you are considering (which is probably not a journey and not a war).

We have also been exploring two big frames throughout this book. One frame is science: a way of learning what is true about ourselves and our world. The other is art: a way of opening up perception so that we can be curious and engaged. Judged as a science, NLP fails because its goal is not to find truth: its goal is to change perception to open up more satisfying possibilities. Judged as an art, much of science fails because it reinforces existing beliefs instead of opening up new perceptions. The frame determines the value of a thought or technique, and the value determines whether you will remember it or act on it.

It's hard to change frames on your own. A frame is like a skeleton: you see the shape it gives things but not the skeleton itself (try for a moment to imagine a person with a different shaped skeleton inside the skin). The best way to start is to study the most accessible frames and then apply something to your situation that does not feel right (if it feels right, you are reinforcing what you already believe, not making change happen).

Some of the frames you know and use instinctively: architecture, technology, art, athletics, battle, races, journey, quest, destiny, geography, geometry, celebrity, true love.

Changing Metaphors

Most frames are also metaphors, and all metaphors work as frames. If you are confused, you are also learning. The last time you thought about metaphors might have been in a high school English class, but that hasn't stopped you from using metaphors every day. Some metaphors are so common that they may be hardwired into the human brain. Whether or not that proves true, it is certain that metaphors provide an extremely efficient way to apply what we know to new information or situations. Since our brains thrive on efficiency, we use lots of metaphors in our thinking and language.

Metaphors result when we use something we can imagine in our senses to understand something that is abstract or uncertain. For instance, a "project" is not usually something you can see, hear or feel (although the results of the project might be). So when we say this project is a real battle, we use the images, sounds and feelings associated with battles (often with what we know of war through books, stories or movies) to understand the feelings and relationships within the project.

You do this, even if you have never thought about doing this. You might say a little girl is a real princess (although she is definitely not a real princess) or that our new boss is an ogre (probably not really) or that the meeting will be an uphill battle (although no hills will be present in the meeting and no one will take a swing at someone else).

Most of the metaphors you use are invisible to you: you use them unconsciously because your brain works with the most efficient tools available. It's as if metaphors were doors; once you step through one, you are occupied with noticing what is on the other side and your awareness of the door disappears. You don't hear the metaphor, so it's hard to change it by yourself (someone else can hear it and help, but we're working here with how NLP allows us to change ourselves).

The best way to change a metaphor is to explore it. You won't know if the metaphor is different than the one you have been applying unconsciously (your unconscious choices remain outside your awareness). But by choosing a metaphor consciously, you give yourself a frame to explore. You can ask questions about the metaphor that will allow you to pay attention to new parts of the situation you want to understand or change. Exploring a metaphor means imagining it in all your senses. If the trip you are taking through a problem is on a boat, then you ask lots of questions about what you know about travelling on a boat. If selling your proposal is an uphill battle, then you begin to ask questions about how people move uphill and how they fight and how hills influence battle strategy.

Remember that your goal is to have new ideas about your situation, and to have ideas that you can imagine in your senses because those ideas are the ones that will stick (you'll remember them and be able to apply them more easily than ideas that are abstractions). A metaphor is not useful because it is true: it is useful because it allows you to see new information that will lead to new behaviours and new possibilities.

You don't evaluate a metaphor according to its creativity: you judge a metaphor by its results. If you are using a metaphor that is not leading to new information, you need another metaphor. Changing the metaphor (like changing the frame) allows you to notice new patterns and new relationships in the information you already have, and might also allow you to notice new facts.

Some of these facts and relationships will already be available to you (that's why your unconscious mind provided you with this metaphor) and some will require more research. Using NLP and the unconscious mind does not mean that you abandon research. It means you look for useful information in new places so that you can achieve new results.

When you're stuck in a pattern of behaviour that isn't working for you, try applying a metaphor. It's an exercise in "what if" thinking: you are asking "What if this situation were like that situation? What new information would I find and how would it allow me to behave differently?" Repeat with different metaphors until you have the ideas you need to take action.

A word about limiting beliefs

You've probably heard that NLP can be used to overcome your limiting beliefs. That's true, more or less.

All beliefs are limiting. That's the point of beliefs. They let in some information and keep out other information. The information that gets in drives some behaviours that lead to a set of possible results. There is no such thing as unlimited beliefs.

Beliefs fall into two different categories. One category is beliefs about the self and the world that are spiritual beliefs founded in a particular religion. The point of these beliefs is that you should not trade them in for other beliefs. They are the beliefs that are built into identity. Whether or not this is practical or effective is a question, but it's not a question that you should ask people of faith. Some beliefs are not meant to be changed, at least not casually. People choose to live within the constraints of these beliefs because they believe that the benefits outweigh the disadvantages in ways that are closely linked to their sense of identity and their ability to live meaningful lives.

Other beliefs are not religious or spiritual and are not necessary to maintain a stable sense of purpose or self. A useful term to represent these kinds of beliefs is presuppositions. A presupposition is something you are willing to accept as true so that you can reduce complexity and focus on particular kinds of facts in a particular situation. They are limiting because focus is limiting (it means giving attention to one thing or class of things and therefore not noticing other things). Presuppositions are a kind of frame or filter, and changing them will provide new information or new evolution of the elements in a given situation.

Changing a belief does not start with a shift in your core; it starts with the question "what if. . . " As soon as you change a presupposition, you shift your limits so that they draw your attention to new information.

4. Suggest The Behaviour You Want

In NLP, the only reason for acquiring new information is that it allows you to behave differently so that you can achieve different results. There may be other models with other reasons, but we started here with the presupposition that we would use language to generate behaviour.

The most direct way for language to generate behaviour seems to be to tell yourself what to do to move toward the result that you want. This means practicing a process that begins outside of language in your imagination. You imagine a sensory representation of what you want and then you allow yourself to choose words to describe what you are seeing and hearing and feeling.

You will not have enough words to adequately and accurately describe what you have imagined, but that is not the point. The point is that the words will become anchors for the experience you have imagined so that when you say the words, your brain/body/mind system will assemble all the elements of the experience you imagined. The description in words is incomplete, but the experience in your imagination is fuller and more compelling.

The experience in the unconscious mind is probably always fuller and more compelling. I say probably because unconscious processes are not knowable (although scientists can use technology to show the activity of the brain when the unconscious mind is active). We know for sure that our unconscious processes drive most of our behaviours and that our unconscious abilities are run by a brain that is more complex than the most powerful computers.

How do you talk to someone who is vastly more powerful than you are? You probably don't snap a command and expect good results. It's more likely that you make a respectful suggestion. A suggestion is an action to be considered, not a command to be followed. When it is offered with respect, it will often be successful in prompting you to take action that moves you toward the thing you want. The question is this: how do you show respect for your unconscious processes while setting an unambiguous direction?

Describe what you want, not what you don't want

The first important principle is to use your sensory imagination to define what you want and then describe it in words. This seems obvious until you consider how often your words are triggered by pain or problems. All of us spend some part of each day describing what we don't want or what we want to stop doing. This is natural but not useful.

Consider a situation in which you are in actual, physical danger. Perhaps you are about to step into the street when you see a car approaching fast. Do you tell yourself "don't walk!" or do you tell yourself "stop!" It's probable in that case you would use Stop! which describes the action you want to take (you want to freeze all motion). If you told yourself "don't walk" you would have to think about walking and then make a choice about what to do instead of walking. Do you need to change direction or change the way you are moving forward? There are too many possibilities to process. The only certain word is "walk" and that might be all you hear (even if you're talking to yourself).

What's your favourite food? Don't think about it. Just stop thinking about your favourite food. Think of anything except your favourite food.

Now notice that you can't think of anything except your favourite food. Sensory tangible information is sticky. In the first example, the word "walk" was a word you could and did imagine. In the next example, you were imagining your favourite food. It's easy to activate the network of sensations that are stored together to represent a sensory experience.

In language, it's easy to cancel something out with the word "not." You can not walk, or not imagine, or not eat. In the mind/brain/body system, there is no way to erase data. Once it is activated, it is sticky. So the only way to not think about your favourite food is to think about it and then hope you can somehow move your attention away from it. You need to do that by being focused on your favourite food and then choosing something else to focus on, and then building a representation of that something else. It's complicated and it takes lots of neurological resources. As you will remember, your brain prefers tasks that take fewer resources.

Now you understand why you so often end up doing the thing you told yourself not to do. It's a processing problem. You will be more effective when you practice telling yourself what you want to have and to do. You can focus your attention on engaging with the thing you want and notice that as all your senses engage with that thing you want, you are also pulled into action whether or not you have told yourself exactly what to do.

Your unconscious mind is always paying attention. When you use your conscious mind to set a goal, your unconscious mind will look for ways to move toward that goal. That means that you will recognize opportunities for action and find that you are doing the required behaviour, often without even thinking about it.

Align Your Conscious and Unconscious Processes

The only way to be sure that you will do something useful is to know what you are trying to do, what direction you want to move, and how you feel when nothing is holding you back or pulling you in different directions. Successful suggestions begin in finding your best whole, congruent self.

Speak to yourself as if you were speaking to someone older, wiser and more powerful than you are. Many people speak to themselves in an abusive way that they would not speak to anyone else, and then are surprised when they don't listen to themselves very well. Instead, speak firmly and courteously to yourself and describe what you want to achieve as best you can.

When you feel that your whole self is aligned with your purpose, you may find that you are already taking action. If you are not yet active, present yourself with some options for your behaviours. Say things like "You might want to. . . ." or "Some people find it useful to. . ." And then complete the suggestion with a specific, sensory tangible behaviour. If you're problem solving on a mental problem, you could try something like this: "Some people find it helpful to widen the frame to include more information. . . " If the behaviour you want to change is a mental behaviour, you'll find it can shift faster than you can get to the end of a sentence.

You can even ask yourself a question like: "What would it take for me to just stand up and do this thing that I know I need to do?" If you ask it respectfully, you'll find that sometimes you give yourself an answer and sometimes you just get busy doing what you know you need to do.

Some Stories Are Also Suggestions

A story is a metaphor with movement. When you need to get yourself moving, pay attention to the stories you are feeding yourself.

You feed yourself stories when you pay attention to them. In any given day, you have the opportunity to consume many different stories: you'll hear little stories at home and at work; you'll hear the news or celebrity gossip; you'll follow a sports team. Each of these stories is a frame that contains states, relationships, actions and outcomes. As you pay attention to them, your unconscious mind has the opportunity to apply them to your own outcome and look for a fit in the pattern of states and behaviours.

When you find a fit between the story and your own situation, you will likely find yourself taking action. The story serves as a suggestion: it puts out a specific pattern of behaviour but leaves room for your unconscious mind to make choices about how and when to apply the pattern. This is both direct (because it contains lots of sensory tangible information) and respectful (because you are not giving direct orders to your bigger, wiser self).

Sometimes the stories you choose will also have a more direct suggestion: someone in the story will do exactly what you need to do. By framing that action in a story rather than a command, you allow yourself to really imagine the action before engaging in it. Imagining is a form of mental rehearsal that conditions you to take action when you notice appropriate cues in the environment around you or the patterns of thought and feeling within you.

You can even use stories from your own memories to inspire you to act. You'll do this more effectively when you find someone to listen to you tell your story. When you have to frame it for someone else, you'll pay more attention to the sensory detail and to the meaning of the story. As you pay attention, you'll underline the significance of the story to your current objectives and give your unconscious mind a strong indication that you want to get moving so that you can get results.

Get Other People To Do Stuff

Much of NLP is based on a flawed presupposition that each of us is alone in our experience and independent in our thoughts and decisions. This is true of the brain. The brain is encased in a skull and does not interact directly with the outside world. It's not true of the mind that is generated by that brain. The human mind interacts continuously with the outside world, responsive to its environment and, especially, to its social relationships. We are social creatures and we require interaction with others to reach our potential and achieve satisfying lives.

As you already know, while you might sometimes feel lonely, you are not alone in your head. You frequently hear other people's voices, imagine their responses, and observe their behaviour so that you can change it or replicate it. The presence of other people in your life is as real and as constant as the presence of your unconscious mind and it is equally important in generating the behaviours that will lead you to achieve more satisfying results.

Our most satisfying results, the results that change lives or change the world, are achieved in collaboration with other people. While we tell stories about a solitary genius, those are just ways of increasing our motivation to do our part. The reality is that we function best when we are active with others. Just as our conscious mind must partner with our unconscious processes, our conscious mind must also partner with other people to do what we most want to do.

The four stages that transform thought into behaviour are the same, but now the focus is on how to connect, chose a state, share ideas and motivate behaviour with other people.

1. Connection Begins with Attention

Words have no power until you are paying attention to them. If you want your words to have an impact on someone else, you have to start by getting their attention. In writing, it seems like you can get someone's attention with words, but that's not entirely true. You had to decide to read this book (and decide to keep reading it) before my words had a chance to get your attention. Something else was true first, and that something else is the reason that these words can make a connection.

You want something. I want something. When our intentions are clear and well-formed, then we are likely to identify the common ground where we can pay attention to each other. This is true even when our intentions are contradictory. We may be opponents, but as long as we both know that getting what we want begins with making a connection, we will begin to identify the conditions and behaviours that will allow us to form that connection.

Connecting is a process of continual testing. We think we know what someone else is thinking or feeling, and then we find a way to test that guess. When we can verify it, the connection gets stronger. When we can't verify it, we need to renew our attention and work to get into sync. In NLP, this process is called calibration. To calibrate you observe someone in a state so that you can recognize that state again. When you think you recognize it, you find a way to test the recognition (if you don't test, you are mind-reading, not calibrating, and that's definitely sciencey and usually misguided).

The goal is to make a connection that is strong enough to support the decision to share a state and use it to transfer ideas from one mind to another. The ideas will motivate new behaviours, but that motivation depends on having enough attention to make the connection that leads to a shared state.

Rapport Means Paying Attention Together

What do you think rapport means? The Oxford English dictionary thinks it means:

> "A close and harmonious relationship in which the people or groups concerned understand each other's feelings or ideas and communicate well."

It's defined this way in words in NLP, too, but in practice, rapport in NLP means something a little different. It means something more like developing a relationship in which you are more likely to agree. Rapport is the first stage of connection.

Most people teach rapport as a way of paying attention to each other. That's part of what happens in rapport, but it's not enough to build rapport that will lead to change. To do that, you need need to build rapport by paying attention together. The together part means that you use mostly unconscious processes to track the attention of the other person by observing the match between your non-verbal behaviour and their non-verbal behaviour. The attention part means that you have a shared focus that becomes the common ground on which you can build a shared state and purpose.

Rapport is signalled when two people are mirroring each other's non-verbal behaviours. They move at the same time; they speak in the same tone of voice; the same expressions move across their faces. The ability to synchronize these behaviours means that some parts of their brains are active in monitoring the other person and attuning to them. It's science (not sciencey) that there are many different parts of a human brain that are active in monitoring the state and predicting the behaviour of other people. In fact, this seems to be the default mode for your brain (the system that is active when you are not deliberately thinking about something else).

Think about that for a moment. It means that as long as you are not paying attention to something else, you will be paying attention to the people around you. This might explain why people in public places often seem to be talking at the same pace and volume, even when they are not talking to one another. It might explain why the stranger at the next table is reaching for his coffee just as you are reaching for your tea. The brain is designed to keep tabs on what other people are thinking and feeling unless it needs all its resources for another task.

NLP begins in observation. People who are in rapport mirror each other's behaviours so NLP has taught that the way to develop rapport is to mirror someone. That's true from a certain point of view.

A better point of view is to say that if you want to influence someone's behaviour, you should start by paying genuine attention to them. As you give them your attention, you will unconsciously adopt their non-verbal behaviours. Your mind/body/brain system does this as a way of building your ability to recognize their state and predict their actions.

This is the beginning of rapport, but it's only rarely possible to stay in this kind of rapt connection by paying attention to each other. We have had experiences of being entranced by someone who finds us entrancing, but those experiences never last very long.

If you want rapport to build the kind of functional connection that will give you access to someone else's state (either so you can choose it for yourself or so you can change it), you will need to pay attention to what the other person is paying attention to.

You'll see this phenomenon when people are in the same class or the same movie theatre. They develop a kind of rapport because they are responding to the same things while also monitoring one another's responses. The result is a sense of social connection that can feel very powerful as long as people share space, attention and physiology.

Now move the frame back just a little and ask: why would people pay attention to the same thing? You will see that rapport requires either a shared physical environment (we are paying attention in case we are eaten by the same tiger) or a shared intention (we are paying attention to the same things because they point towards something we both want). To develop rapport means to pay attention to someone and let that show in your body and expressions. To develop a useful rapport, you must then be able to develop a shared focus and a shared direction and allow that to occupy your conscious attention while your unconscious mind monitors your connection.

It's very complicated because your brain/body/mind system is very complicated as it interacts with another person. The process you have to track consciously is much less complicated:

- focus on the person you with whom you want to connect

- allow your non-verbal behaviours to mirror their non-verbal behaviours (you'll want to do this as soon as you are focused on them)

- turn your conscious attention to a shared focus and check in periodically to see that your non-verbal behaviours are still a match for the other person's behaviours (the relationship between your non-verbal behaviour and their non-verbal behaviour will always give a more accurate representation of your rapport than the meaning of your words will give).

Hold Your Intention While Shifting Your Attention

Your non-verbal behaviours are a representation of your state at any given moment: the emotion, physiology, sensations and thoughts that filter experience so that you can think thoughts or take action. When you go into a connection with a person or group of people, you alter your non-verbal behaviours to match their non-verbal behaviours. This means that you will begin to shift into a shared state.

If the shared state is optimal for what you want to feel and do, then you can focus on building rapport. If you find yourself in rapport with someone who is in a state that you don't want to choose, you need to be aware that the rapport is changing your experience.

The first step in choosing an optimal state is recognizing that you always have a choice. You don't have to slip into someone else's state and stay there to maintain rapport.

One of the ways to recognize that your own state is being shifted by rapport is to deliberately shift your attention to view your situation from different points of view. In NLP, these are called perceptual positions. When you are in tight rapport, you will notice that the other person's point of view (called 2nd position in NLP) and your point of view (called 1st position in NLP) begin to feel very much alike. This feeling allows us to cooperate and collaborate. It can also allow us to slide into the strongest state in the connection, whether or not it is aligned with our intentions for our own experience.

The solution is often to slide out into what NLP calls 3rd position: a position from which you can see yourself and the other person in the context of your situation. From this position, you can see whether the two people you are observing are moving closer or farther away from your intention for them.

Moving your attention in this way is resource-intensive. It takes willpower to monitor your connection. That willpower is easier to find when you have a clear intention for connecting. If you don't know where you want to go, you'll find that you don't make the effort to evaluate the way your state is changing in response to a connection.

2. Move Your Connection to A Useful State

We know states are contagious. Science knows this and you know it from your own experience and NLP knows it through most of the processes described so far. One person can catch another's mood in roughly the same way as they catch each other's viruses.

The problem is how to ensure that the most useful state is the one that gets caught.

NLP was developed by observing therapists at work. While there is some possibility that a therapist will 'catch' a state from a client, there are some protective factors that make it easier for the therapist to go into rapport and introduce a useful state into the connection. The most obvious of these is that the problem that makes someone become a therapist's client has nothing to do with the therapist. Both therapist and client can pay attention to the problem without assigning the same meaning to it because for the client it is a deeply personal experience and for the therapist it is someone else's problem. Both the client and the therapist are motivated to have the client 'catch' a more resourceful state so that those resources can be applied to solving the problem.

This is not the situation in most relationships. When people connect for the purpose of collaboration, they are all attached to the same situation and to at least one shared goal within that situation. This makes empathy easier (the ability to feel someone else's pain) which may also make it harder to stay detached enough to lead the connection into a more resourceful state (a state where more good things become possible). The matching and mirroring that works for a therapist can be much messier in relationships where people are working together for similar goals and even messier in adversarial relationships or negotiation.

Let's look at how it is possible to determine the state into which people will move while connected to you. The basic pattern is to recognize the state they're in; develop a connection; move to non-verbal behaviours that represent a more desirable state; notice whether they are following you; and repeat.

Use Physiology and the Environment to Support Change

The key to leading is to know where the connection needs to go to be useful so that you can connect without being sucked into a negative state. In NLP, it's called pacing and leading. While pacing, you mirror someone else to pick up their state and form a connection. Then you lead by introducing changes in non-verbal behaviour so that the other person will gradually move into a state you choose. It's a great theory until you realize how much self-control it takes to make this happen. There's a significant contradiction between being connected and maintaining control of your own state.

There are three pieces to making this work.

1. The first piece is to be very clear on what state you want to lead into and how that state generates the choices that will lead to your very clear outcome. From moment to moment you need to be able to recognize where you are and imagine where you want to go ultimately and where you want to go next. People work best by small steps; they won't resist tiny changes in non-verbal behaviours, especially when those changes are associated with feeling stronger, more confident or more comfortable. You need to know the state to which you are leading so well that you can keep it firmly in your mind while you match contradictory non-verbal behaviours to maintain your connection.

2. The second piece is to use your body to introduce the change you want to see. Because most of our physical life is driven by unconscious processes, we are unlikely to resist change that we can incorporate unconsciously. If you ask someone to jump up and down, they will become conscious of the physical change and may resist it. But if you tilt your head and shoulders back so that you are looking straight ahead instead of down, someone in rapport with you is likely to make those changes without thinking about them. As they take on the physiology of more power, they will experience themselves as more confident and more comfortable. You can use the same strategy to get people to open up postures, uncross their arms or legs, or breathe a little deeper.

3. The third piece is to use the environment to support your state so that you can support a change in the other person's state. If your attention remains fixed on the other person, you will both become uncomfortably entangled in your connection. It will be hard to know who belongs to what elements of your shared state, and hard to move forward. It's easier to move when you are looking outwards. You can look outwards in a real, physical sense by noticing elements of your environment that are anchors to the state you want to hold (this is why therapists are careful about how they decorate their offices). Every environment is so rich in sensory stimuli that you will find elements on which to focus that pull you into the state you want. As you focus on them, your focus will attract the focus of anyone connected to you. This stabilizes the connection and opens it up.

Point to Models to Suggest States

Remember when you were a little kid and learning tremendously fast? You would look at someone you admired and pretend that you were them. It's a natural and extremely effective way for the human race to grow. We identify people who can do something really well and pretend we can do it too until we learn the skills, strengths and states necessary to stop pretending and just do it.

When you want to lead someone into a more resourceful state, you can direct their attention to the people they have observed who have demonstrated that state. You do this by telling stories and asking questions that maintain the connection you have while focusing attention on the resourceful state towards which you are moving.

In NLP courses, you might learn personal edits: exercises that make change possible usually by getting you to imagine the change while shifting your physiology. The games get you to stand or sit so that some states are anchored into some positions and some change happens at the edges of your perceptions. Outside the NLP training or coaching room, it's harder to get people to play some of these games. But it's always possible to get someone to move from standing to sitting (or back) and it's always possible to introduce a story about someone who is known to represent a particular kind of skill or courage or calm.

Someone who is in rapport with you will want to stay in rapport. As you tell a story, they try to follow the story. This means they imagine what you are describing. If you are describing what you want, they will start to adjust their perception and physiology to match what you describe (that's how they understand the words). Of course, if the connection is sufficiently strong, you can ask them to tell the story. When they tell the story they have to step into the shoes of the characters in the story, which means temporarily imagining that they have the strengths, skills and qualities they are describing.

You may also be able to point attention to a time when the person you want to influence demonstrated the state you want to elicit in them. Our past selves inhabit our unconscious mind and are available to inspire us. They are hard to resist, because they obviously do have enough in common with us that we have to confess to at least an echo of their strengths and perceptions. Our memories of them are also full of the kind of sensory detail that makes it easy to recreate a state: while someone might deny having the energy or curiosity they had when they were much younger, recalling sensory details from that time is likely to elicit a version of that energy or curiosity.

The Basic Pattern for Changing a State

In general, to get someone else to change state you can use the same strategies you would use to change your own state: you can change physiology, use anchors, or use imagination to connect to resources. It's also easier to use these strategies when working with someone else because more of your attention is move through the strategy when you're not focused on a separate outcome.

Whether you want to coach or teach or sell, when you want someone to do something you need to begin with an intention. You need to know what you want and what states will be necessary to create the most influence with the least resistance.

The next step is to pay attention to the person you want to influence. Influence requires connection and connection starts with attention: you need to focus on the person, not the problem you want to solve. You are calibrating: eliciting states and noticing what changes as this person moves through different states. You are also connecting by mirroring what you observe and noticing what changes in you. This teaches you the most effective way to get this person (or group of people) to shift states.

When you are ready to build connection, you let your attention guide you into mirroring what you observe. You will feel the congruence as your non-verbal behaviours attune to the other person's and you will also feel the temptation to narrow your focus to the connection.

When you are tempted to focus only on the connection you know it is time to focus with the other person instead of on that person. This means different things depending on your context. You might focus on a problem the person wants to solve (or a problem you want to solve); you might focus on a goal you both want to reach or a situation you both want to explore. As you focus with the other person, you periodically check to ensure that you are still usefully connected.

Once you know what you both want, it's time to move into the state that will help you achieve it. You can do this by manipulating focus and sensations (sensory information), by changing physiology, by using anchors to access previous experiences, or by telling stories that use metaphors or models. As you move the other person's attention through these techniques, your own attention periodically checks that you are still in strong rapport. You also calibrate to ensure that the other person is fully engaged in the resourceful state.

You are always influencing people to be more resourceful. People who are resourceful are more predictable than people who are not resourceful. While it might be tempting to undermine someone's confidence or cool, it also makes it know what will happen next. Carrying out your own strategy is easier when the other person's state and goals are more stable.

When you know the other person is in a resourceful state, you support that state with your own physiology and non-verbal behaviours while you move your shared attention in a direction that supports a shared outcome or goal. You can now focus on communicating the information that will lead to the behaviour necessary to satisfy your intention.

3. Move Ideas From Your Head To Theirs

If you've read this far, you now have a pretty good idea why so many people struggle to get ideas from their heads into someone else's head. Whether they are coaching, teaching, managing, parenting or selling, they want to communicate information in a way that is accepted and remembered. Most people focus on the information they want to communicate. But success requires that you focus first on how to set up the communication.

Once you have set it up, most of the choices you make using your unconscious processes will be appropriate. If you need to communicate to a group, or if the situation involves tension or resistance, then you might need to be more deliberate in fine-tuning your communication so that your information is received and remembered.

NLP has promoted many ideas about the most effective way to get people to learn. Much time has been given in NLP training to complicated concepts about learning and processing preferences. Some of this teaches that people have a preferred sensory system for receiving and processing information. Some of it teaches something called meta-programs, which are preferred strategies for processing the information you receive. This is sciencey.

There is little evidence in science that matching learning strategies improves learning. There is much anecdotal evidence in NLP, that matching strategies is effective. The problem with anecdotes are that they are filtered through beliefs and presuppositions. If you believe a technique is useful, you will attribute results to it. Current science does not show that people learn better when you match their learning styles. It shows people learn better when they work at learning.

While many NLP trainings have been wrong about the effects of matching preferences, they have often also provoked people to be curious about how people work and what is possible. The use of stories and questions has been deeply embedded in NLP teaching styles: both of these are techniques that require people work to decipher and grasp the information being communicated.

The communication has been aided by a second principle that is supported by both science and the arts: information is stickier when it is imagined in the senses. As long as memory has been important to human beings, they have created associations between abstract facts or concepts and easily imagined sensory data. These associations allow information to be stored in more parts of the brain (the visual centres for pictures, the auditory centres for the sounds of words, the language centres for the words that represent the concepts, etc.). Information stored this way is easier to retrieve and more resilient over time (so that you remember longer).

Make Information Sticky

An almost unimaginable amount of information flows into our brains every moment. We never lack information. When you give someone new information so that they will have ideas that change their behaviours, you need to begin by understanding that people manage an ongoing flow of information by ignoring or letting go of most of it. The problem is to convey information in a way that sticks so that people can explore, evaluate and remember it.

There are two ways to make information more sticky, and both involve connecting the information to the body. The first is to associate the information with an emotion. Emotions are not just ideas; they are ideas that move in our bodies, changing our physiology so that we breathe, stand and move differently. When you associate information with an emotion, the mind/body/brain system is very active and the information is treated as significant and wired into more parts of the brain so that there are more ways to retrieve it.

There can be unintended consequences in adding emotional resonance to information you want to convey. Emotions are complicated and anchored to many different memories. You may be introducing associations you would rather not add, and filters for the information that will not be helpful.

A more reliable way to get information from the mind into the body is to include enough sensory detail to engage the sensory processing systems in the brain. When you associate an abstract idea with sensory information it becomes easier to remember and, often, easier to understand. Understanding helps someone engage actively with the idea, which means that it becomes even more likely that they will be able to remember it.

Sensory coding can be symbolic: you don't have to paint your face blue to feel blue, and when you are feeling blue you are still attaching an idea to a sensory representation. You don't have to be on top of a mountain to have a mountain-top experience where everything is suddenly clear and distant enough to be seen without emotion. But that experience is easier to represent when you associate it with pictures you have seen taken from the tops of mountains or, perhaps, your personal experience with climbing to the top of a mountain.

Sensory words creep into our descriptions naturally: think of the difference between an impact (sensory) and an influence (abstract). Some words will open up new ways of thinking about the idea described, and others will simply make it easier to imagine and so easier to remember.

Say It Again

Have you ever asked: "How many times do I have to tell you?…." Most of us get tired of repeating ourselves. We believe that one, clear statement should be enough to make information stick. We believe this even though we have lots of evidence in our own experience that it's not often true.

Repeating an idea in slightly different ways makes it stick. One of the ways we learn is by hearing or seeing the same thing more than once. As we access the memory of what we have already heard, we make the neural pathways stronger and more reliable so that we can find our way back to that idea again.

Repeating is another way to get information into the hardwiring of your brain/mind/body system. While the mind might not even register that you are hearing the same thing in different ways (because you have so much information available that it's not possible to pay attention to it all), your brain registers that an idea is familiar at a level outside of awareness. We respond differently to familiar things even when we don't know consciously that we have seen or heard them before.

As we move into a post-truth, sciencey age, it's important to know that hearing something repeatedly makes it more likely that it will feel first familiar, and then true. When we feel something is true, we don't work very hard to verify it. If you want someone to agree with you or remember a new idea, repeating it so that it will become familiar will also help you convince someone that the idea is true.

If we don't work to explore and verify, we lose conscious access to an idea. This is important in two ways. If you want someone to accept something at the level of framing (so that it sets up some automatic patterns of perception and action), then repetition may be sufficient to set up the next stage of communication. If you need someone to have conscious access to information so that they can use it deliberately in the next stage, then you will need to repeat in ways that provoke awareness. We don't get conscious mastery of an idea without working for it.

Make Them Work For It

If your goal for a communication requires that someone remember and be able to use the information you communicate, then you need them to make an effort. Your own attention should be as much on what it will take to motivate that effort as it is on making the information clear and accurate. To put this another way: your job as a communicator is to engage the efforts of someone else to actively receive your information.

This runs counter to many, many expectations about what a good communicator should be doing. We expect our teachers to make information easier to understand. We expect sales people to anticipate our needs. We expect our coaches to tell us what to do so that we can perform better or feel better. We believe that it is the responsibility of the communicator to make ideas clear and accessible.

In NLP, people have not been taught that they need to engage people in making an effort to learn. But they have been taught that asking questions and telling stories are brilliant ways to develop rapport and influence behaviour. Asking questions and telling stories are both brilliant strategies for engaging others to actively consider and explore new information.

Because we tell stories to children, we assume that they are an 'easy' way to communicate. This is true in that they correspond to what appear to be natural strategies in the human mind/brain/ body system for organizing information and remembering it. It's not true if you think it means that one person talks and the other person passively soaks up what is said. That's not accurate. Storytelling requires active attention from both teller and listener. Listeners must imagine the narrative happening and make sense of how it relates to their own lives and experience.

In the same way, when we ask questions we encourage people to become actively engaged with information instead of letting it filter into and out of their awareness. Whether or not people answer questions out loud, just hearing a question triggers a search for a possible answer. This often activates memories and sensory impressions that are necessary to understand a context or situation, and then drives a narrowing down to an answer to the question.

Stories and questions both create the shared focus that deepens rapport. That rapport facilitates a shared state of curiosity or exploration that generates a willingness to work to acquire and understand new information or ideas.

4. Get People to Do Stuff

Finally! We've arrived at the section where we talk about the magic it takes to transform an idea in your mind to an action that someone else carries out. We've foreshadowed this moment in the previous section, as you learned how to take an idea in your head and use it to provoke curiosity and effort so someone else can learn from it. Now you want that person to learn and take action, to behave differently because you want them to behave differently.

Much of the time, you will find that it's already happening. If you've made and built a connection, shared a focus, entered a useful state and communicated information so that it sticks, the other person or people might already be taking action. You don't always have to specify the behaviour if you have clearly shared the desired result of that behaviour. People who are motivated to take action will find that their unconscious minds (their mind/brain/body systems) can move very quickly. That gets their bodies moving too so that they take action to move in the direction of what they want.

If they are not moving, or they are not moving in the way you want, you will have to go through one more stage in the process. In this stage you may either suggest or command action. Commands work within very specific relationships in very specific situations. Suggestions are more widely effective because they require only that you share a connection, a focus, and any ideas that are necessary to taking action.

Here are three ways to make someone imagine taking action (so that they are likely to actually take action):

- Tell a story. To understand a story, the listener must imagine the events in the story as if they were playing the parts themselves. All stories lead listeners to imagine action.

- Presuppose the action you want to motivate. This means that you talk as if the action has already happened, either to the listener or to someone else (to process the idea that someone has done this thing, the listener has to imagine doing the thing or observing it being done).

- Describe the behaviour you want the person to do. Just say what you want in a clear, sticky way.

Stories Are Metaphors With Action

When you tell a story you do more than convey ideas in a way that is sticky and builds states and rapport. You suggest that states and goals lead naturally to behaviour: in stories, the point of ideas is to drive action. While the action in the story is rarely exactly the action you want the listener to take, the action in the story represents a connection between thought and action that can lead to the listener doing something to move toward a shared focus or goal.

Both the sequence and the priorities in the telling of the story are important. A story begins in rapport, in a willingness to connect and mirror. If you don't build a connection, you can't use that connection to transfer ideas that generate movement. When you have built a useful shared state and focus with the story, then you can ask your listener to imagine an action as if they were the one doing it. Imagining action will lead to action if the states and situation in the story have parallels in the situation you want to influence.

This is where I will often insert an example. But the point of good storytelling is that it can't be reduced to a quick summary. A good story is a complex response to a complex situation. You can be intentional about what you want, about the quality of connection you will need to motivate someone, and about using a story as a way to suggest that action is both necessary and desirable. You can't draw a one-to-one correspondence between the story and the situation you want to influence. If you do, if the parallel is too obvious, there are two probable outcomes. One is that the story is dismissed as not relevant (this is more likely if you have tried too hard to make it relevant). The other is that the listener takes the action described in the story but does it without the full engagement of their unconscious resources.

The best way to prepare to share a useful story is to share lots of stories, most of them for the purpose of building state and connection. The larger your internal library of stories, the more likely it is that you will unconsciously choose a story that inspires action. The patterns woven between the story and the relationship and the situation are too complicated to manipulate consciously. Use your conscious mind to acquire stories (by listening or observing them) and to sharpen your intention (so that you know what response you want). Then trust your unconscious mind to do the calculations so that you tell a story that represents the best fit for the situation.

There is no risk in this. Either your listener will accept the suggestion to act (and you win) or your listener will become more connected to your state and focus as they listen to the story (and you win).

Presuppose The Behaviour You Want To Motivate

Stories are not the only way to make a suggestion instead of a command. While we all have moments when we'd like to just tell people what to do and have them do it, commands are expensive. When you make a command, you put your connection on the line. If you don't have enough connection, the command won't be followed and you will lose whatever connection you have built. It will be harder to start again to build a connection than it was to start the first time.

Presupposing the behaviour you want to suggest is not a language trick: it's a perceptual trick you play on yourself. You imagine the future that results after the listener has taken the action you want them to take. When you imagine it vividly, it begins to feel real to you. As it feels real, it becomes part of how you describe the future. While NLP has explained the language piece, the language is following the imagination here. In design thinking, on the other hand, it's common to imagine the desired result and then wonder what behaviour had to happen to achieve it. The imagined future becomes a frame that sets up the language you use when you talk about it.

If you find you need a linguistic prompt to presuppose the behaviour you want, think about these openings:

- I wonder what you could do to [take a step towards the goal we share]

- After you have [completed the behaviour], what else will you need to think about?

- What if you could [achieve the purpose of the desired behaviour]?

All of these make an indirect suggestion that the listener take action. But none of them directly require that action, and so none of them can be directly resisted. Your goal is first to preserve the relationship that you built so that you could have this conversation. That means protecting the alignment between your states and non-verbal behaviours while you introduce new information about the future you desire. On the one hand, you are making your focus contingent on something that might not happen; you aren't pretending it's the only possible future. On the other hand, you are describing a future in sensory specific detail that represents the goals or values you share with the other person. You've also placed your point of view in the future looking back, so that your representation fits into the category of memory. This means that the future you presuppose can feel more real than a future you describe as if it has not happened yet.

The other advantage of presupposing a behaviour instead of defining it is that the action you imagine might not be the only way (or the best way) for the other person to move toward your shared outcome. When you take their attention to a future where they have already taken action to do what needs to be done, they might discover a new and better story about how they got there. This engages them in a way that makes it much more likely they'll take action.

Practice Saying What You Want

People do what they imagine doing. That's the finding of lots of science on the value of mental rehearsal and it's the point of the NLP model of goal-setting. When you clearly imagine the sensory data, physiology, emotions and thoughts associated with achieving something, you are more likely to find yourself taking the actions you have imagined taking. Athletes are not the only ones who play the way they practice.

When you practice talking about what you want in ways that stick, you make two things more likely:

- You'll become increasingly clear about the details of what you want and so increasingly sensitive to opportunities in your environment that would support what you want

- Other people will imagine what you want at a level of detail that will make it feel real to them so that they are more likely to be sensitive to opportunities to take action that matches what they have imagined while listening to you.

There have been times in your life when you have forgotten where an idea originated; by the time you were engaged in taking action, you were not sure whether it was your idea or someone else's. Once you imagine something clearly, it feels like yours. This is especially true when you first heard the idea from someone who was connecting with you by matching your non-verbal behaviours and your focus.

However, people reliably and repeatedly state what they want much less often than you might expect. That's because it takes willpower and practice to regularly say what you want instead of saying what you fear or dislike. The human mind/brain/body system defaults to safety. This means it scans the environment for danger and problems so that you can fix or fight or flee before you get hurt. It's not an option: this is a default function of human perception and reasoning.

You can't turn this default off, and you can't even turn it down a little. It is what it is: your bigger self wants to keep you safe. What you can do is turn up the alternative focus by practice (repetition fuelled by willpower). If you are determined to look at every situation and see what is useful and what is possible, you will begin to add that scan to the scan you do for danger.

As you scan for what you want, it becomes easier to describe what you are are seeing or imagining that represents a desirable future. It becomes easier to give words to what you value and what you want to perceive and to achieve. As you say it, listeners imagine it (that's how human beings make sense of language). As they imagine it, it becomes a little more real, a little more compelling.

So practice spelling it out for you and for them. What is it you want now?

Does NLP Work?

Does NLP work? If you don't know what you want and you're not committed to finding out, NLP doesn't work. It doesn't work because work means two things: it means "function to produce reliable results" and it also means "make an effort." Like most things, NLP only produces reliable results when you are willing to make an effort and use it appropriately. If you are in great pain, you know what you want. You want the pain to stop. If you are not in great pain, you have decisions to make. You have to choose outcomes. values and a direction. You have to decide what you want.

NLP can be useful to you once you know what you want. The process outlined in this book (connect, choose a state, gather information, take action) always works when you respect the whole of the process. If you jump directly to action, it may work. Perhaps the conditions are already set so that you have the connection, the state and the information you need. Your unconscious mind works at incredible speed and if the conditions are right you might take action before you have time to think through the process consciously. That can happen. If it doesn't happen, it's because you're missing a stage and the safest way to find what you need is to go through the process systematically.

NLP is not concerned with being true; it's concerned with relating perception to outcomes in useful ways. Sometimes we tell scary stories to keep kids in their tents and out of the woods late at night. Those stories contain a truth (it's dangerous to be alone in the woods at night) but that truth is surrounded by some true things and some not-true things. Much of NLP functions this way: it contains the truth that you have what you need to move toward what you want and it surrounds this truth with a mix of true and not-true things. The purpose of NLP is not to be true. It is to be useful.

If you need it to be both true and useful to meet your personal criteria for moving forward, then you can find enough in NLP that is science-based and evidence-based to be very useful. You don't need the fictions of sensory preferences and meta-programs and eye patterns to go through the four stages of transforming words to action. You can become more aware of how you are connecting to yourself and to others; you can make choices about how to be influenced and where to go in a relationship; you can gather information, give it meaning, and share it with others; and you can use what you know to drive the behaviours that lead to achievement. This is all as reliable as your commitment to owning your life and setting your own direction.

That commitment depends on willpower and on your belief that you have the skills to do what you need to do. Both are best acquired in a community of practice; a group of like-minded people who allow you to practice learning and teaching and moving from words to behaviour. Most great innovations and achievements come from people who are inspiring and challenging and collaborating. Social connections fuel both willpower and curiosity. With willpower and curiosity, you can connect, choose, learn, and act to produce the changes you want in yourself and the world.